



Elizabeth Dunay, equal employment advisor at Fort Devens, Mass., and LTC Keith Blowe, a 101st Airborne Division EO advisor, collaborate on a presentation during a workshop at the Orlando training conference.

Respecting Soldiers

Story and Photos by MSG Bob Haskell

SFC Bonnie Lagoda, a 15-year Army veteran, has spent half of her life in the Army. As a military police soldier, Lagoda has twice gone to war — to Panama for Operation Just Cause in December 1989 and to Saudi Arabia for Operation Desert Storm in 1991. And she's savored every moment of the 27 months she's served as a platoon sergeant.

"Tough as nails" could have described her in harsher times. "Mentally tough" characterizes Lagoda well in her considerably different capacity, in this more culturally correct era.

Lagoda is the equal opportunity advisor for a noncommissioned officer academy and drill sergeant school at Fort Leonard Wood, Mo. She advises

her commander on appropriate ways to observe ethnic holidays and to work with soldiers who believe they have been discriminated against because of race or religion, or who feel they have been victims of sexual harassment.

She is among the corps of active-duty and reserve-component soldiers and civilians who are determined to make sure that every soldier and civilian affiliated with the Army, regardless of their gender, race or ethnic background, gets an even break.

Lagoda was among nearly 500 of her counterparts in Orlando, Fla., during the week after Thanksgiving. The Army began the holiday season, and remembered civil rights icon Rosa

Parks, with its third-annual worldwide training conference for its uniformed equal-opportunity and civilian equal-employment practitioners.

"Complexities of Diversity: Analyzing the Depth and Breadth of Equal Opportunity Issues" was the theme for the conference, which mirrored the modern Army. It catered to 249 active-duty advocates serving from Kansas to Korea, to 108 members of the Army National Guard and to 79 Army Reserve soldiers.

The attendees focused on finding better ways to enforce the EO policy that states: "The U.S. Army will provide equal opportunity and fair treatment for military personnel,

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family members and Department of the Army civilians without regard to race, color, gender, religion or national origin and provide an environment free from unlawful discrimination and offensive behavior.”

The policy, updated in 1999, applies on and off Army posts, during duty and nonduty hours, and to all working, living and recreational environments.

Lagoda believes she has benefited from the Army’s emphasis on equality.

A policy change in 1994 that opened up 92 percent of the Army’s career fields to women throughout the active and reserve components made it possible for her to become one of the first direct-support MP, female platoon sergeants in the Army’s rapid-deployment force. She was serving with the 3rd Infantry Division’s 1st Brigade at Fort Stewart, Ga., at the time.

“That was cool. It would never have happened if not for equal opportunity,” said Lagoda, who is expanding her horizons in other ways. She has earned an associate’s degree in criminal justice and is pursuing a bachelor’s degree in human resources.

“When we start breaking glass ceilings, all of a sudden the cream rises to the top,” observed one of the conference’s guest speakers, MG Thomas Plewes, chief of the Army Reserve.

Plewes, Air National Guard LTG Russell C. Davis, chief of the National Guard Bureau, and other guest speak-

ers stressed the importance of sustaining the equal-opportunity effort throughout the Army, so that every soldier has a fair chance to train, and attend schools and earn promotions.

“We owe them the opportunity to compete in a fair environment,” said Davis. “This is about making it a better Army, so the Army can get the most from its soldiers, and so soldiers can get the most from their Army.”

The Army’s diverse nature means the equal opportunity job is never done, said Iris Bulls, the Army’s principal deputy assistant secretary for manpower and reserve affairs.

“We bring in 80,000 active-duty soldiers every year,” she said. “We need people who are effective in dealing with people who are different from them.”

The differences are defined in many ways.

The million-soldier Army marched into the new millennium with a population that is “59.2 percent white, 26.5 percent African American, 7.6

percent Hispanic and 6.7 percent other ethnic groups,” according to the Army’s 2001 posture statement.

It further states that “members of the Army community represented over 150 religious groups.” They come

from the suburbs, the inner cities and rural America. They range in age from 17 to 65. Their educational levels vary from high school equivalency to multiple degrees.

Women make up 15.3 percent of the active Army, 11.3 percent of the Army Guard and nearly 25 percent of the Army Reserve, said LTC Margaret Flott, the women in the Army policy officer.

Those attending the conference recalled such EO

champions as former President Harry S. Truman, who in 1948 ordered the armed forces to provide equal treatment and opportunity to black servicemen, and Rosa Parks, who in 1955 refused to give her seat to a white man on a bus in Montgomery, Ala.

Mostly, however, the equal-opportunity practitioners who have already trained at the Florida-based Defense Equal Opportunity Management Institute explored the nuts and bolts of getting along during workshops dealing with, among other things, “The Reality of Racism” and “Negotiating Equal Opportunity With Difficult People.”

“We are adding tools to their toolboxes,” said BG William Heilman, the conference host and head of the Army’s Human Resources Directorate. “We are stressing the proactive approach at this conference. It’s a lot better to address these issues before they become problems.”

Lagoda knows why that is important after twice going to war.

“We have reduced the size of the Army, but the Army’s focus for winning our nation’s battles is at the squad and team level,” she said. “If we can’t deal with our differences, if we can’t get along, it could affect the outcome of the entire battle.” □



Patrick MacKenzie, a retired first sergeant, enthusiastically conducts a workshop on managing the diversity of different psychological types.



Equal opportunity advisors from throughout the Army got the chance to share opinions and ask questions during the conference, held the week after Thanksgiving.